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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000052

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/ANP

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [TN](#)

SUBJECT: TONGAN PRIME MINISTER RESIGNS

REF: A. 05 SUVA 613

[1](#)B. 05 SUVA 494 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR DINGER, SECTIONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Tongan Prime Minister, Prince 'Ulukalala Lavaka Ata, has resigned. Lavaka Ata, youngest son of the King of Tonga, submitted his resignation on Saturday, February 11, to his older brother Prince Regent Tupouto'a. Tupouto'a named Minister of Labour, Commerce, and Industries Fred Sevele, a commoner, as Acting Prime Minister. Theories and rumors abound regarding the reasons for the PM's sudden departure, but mismanagement and scandals have plagued Lavaka Ata and his government for many months. End Summary.

#### Crown Prince Seizes Window of Opportunity

[1](#)2. (C) With the king's continued presence in New Zealand for medical treatment, Prince Regent and Crown Prince Tupouto'a was the one to accept PM Lavaka Ata's resignation on February [1](#)11. Sources said Crown Prince and acting Head of State Tupouto'a asked the PM to resign. According to reports, this is not the first time the PM has considered resignation. In the wake of last year's public service strike (reftel B), many sources told Emboffs that the PM had attempted to resign at the height of the strike. In reftel A, we reported that Prince Tui'pelehake, nephew of the king, told the Ambassador in November that Crown Prince Tupouto'a was attempting to replace Lavaka Ata with Fred Sevele. The king's absence and the Crown Prince's position as Prince Regent seem to have given him the opportunity he was looking for. Just last week, the Crown Prince returned to Tonga from overseas.

#### Commoner Appointed PM

[1](#)3. (SBU) Fred Sevele, a people's representative who was appointed Minister of Labour, Commerce, and Industries in March 2005, was selected by Tupouto'a as Acting Prime Minister. Over the past 11 months Sevele has served as Acting PM on several occasions when Lavaka Ata has been out of Tonga. Sevele, a successful businessman, has been one of the few bridges between the royals and the pro-democracy groups. Sevele has associated with the Tonga Human Rights and Democracy Movement for many years but is also a trusted interlocutor for the royal family. Sevele was one of the members of the government negotiating team instrumental in resolving last year's strike.

## Reasons behind the change: Civil Aviation?

14. (C) Some sources say the reason Lavaka Ata was forced out is Tonga's civil aviation mess. As PM, Lavaka Ata also maintained civil aviation as part of his portfolio. Two years ago, Lavaka Ata was Chairman of the Board of Royal Tongan Airlines when it declared bankruptcy and handed the government some rather hefty debts. In 2005, a domestic airline monopoly was granted to Peau Vava'u Airlines, owned by the Crown Prince. In December 2005, citing Peau Vava'u's failure to live up to its obligations to service a number of Tonga's smaller islands, the Ministry of Civil Aviation revoked Peau Vava'u's monopoly status and awarded Air Fiji a license to operate within Tonga. Many believe the Crown Prince is unhappy about the increased competition.

15. (C) Former Secretary of Civil Aviation Mapa Faletau's contract with the Ministry of Civil Aviation was abruptly terminated on January 19, which some say was due to the revocation of Peau Vava'u's monopoly. Publicly Faletau stated he wanted to take care of his recently inherited noble title and associated responsibilities. We note, though, in addition to Lavaka Ata's professional capacity as Minister of Civil Aviation, rumor in Tonga has it that he and Faletau have had an illicit relationship (reftel B).

### Other rumors

16. (C) Rumors about Lavaka Ata's relationships as well as his stonewalling during the 2005 civil service strike have resulted in his increasing unpopularity in Tonga. Tonga's economy also is facing serious difficulties and many blame Lavaka Ata for lack of leadership. To add to the troubles of Lavaka Ata's government, the Speaker of the Tongan

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Parliament, Honorable Veikune, was recently convicted of bribery, and stripped of both his Parliamentary seat and his noble title.

Comment: Perhaps a good sign, but too soon to tell

17. (C) Lavaka Ata is a committed monarchist, and his statements during a Washington visit in late 2005 served to underscore his opposition to democratic options in Tonga. By contrast, Crown Prince Tupouto'a is widely believed to be somewhat more receptive to change. A recent Commonwealth group that met with both men confirmed this impression.

18. (C) In terms of day-to-day governance, many believe Sevele would be a better leader as Tonga faces its current economic crisis. Whether or not the resignation signals a royal-family willingness to consider serious democratic reform is not yet certain.

DINGER